



GCC Soft Power: Towards a Collective Approach

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Introduction

« *Si c'était à refaire, je commencerais par la culture* », which can be translated as “If it were to be redone, I would begin with culture”, is a famous phrase often attributed to Jean Monnet, one of the architects of the European Union (EU). It was further echoed by Robert Schuman, another EU founding figure, who insisted that « *[l]’Europe, avant d’être une alliance militaire ou une entité économique, doit être une communauté culturelle dans le sens le plus élevé de ce terme* », meaning that Europe, before being a military alliance or an economic entity, must be a cultural community in the highest sense of the term. Both views reflect the importance of culture in cementing regional cohesion, as well as the strategic dimension of culture as a tool in shaping political realities.¹ However, the strategic value of culture does not stop at intra-regional space, as shared symbols, narratives, and heritage can be projected and used as an instrument of influence on the international stage. The idea was theorized and elaborated by the prominent scholar, Professor Joseph Nye, who stipulated culture as a key component of soft power, along with political values and foreign policies.

Within this context, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, comprising, in alphabetical order, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are emerging as some of the most prominent soft power players on the global stage, increasingly using soft power as a central instrument of their foreign policy. On the one hand, the GCC states are undertaking major macroeconomic transformations aimed at diversifying their economies. This diversification, combined with efforts toward energy transition, seeks to reduce reliance on a single resource, hydrocarbons, and thus directly touches upon questions of economic security and long-term prosperity. For these goals, engaging with different actors in the international arena, such as state and non-state actors, global public opinion, and individuals, becomes crucial in shaping their preferences and creating “positive magnetic effects”² to attract them and accomplish the national diversification agendas. International visibility and reputation thus emerge as levers to mitigate vulnerability and support national transformation efforts, which are at the heart of the foreign policy strategies of the six states. As the

¹ Pierre Buhler, “*Quel ‘soft power’ européen ? Un espace politique s’ouvre aujourd’hui*,” *Diploweb*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.diploweb.com/Quel-soft-power-europeen-Un-espace-politique-s-ouvre-aujourd-hui.html>.

² Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 92.



UAE's Principles of the 50 strategic document explicitly states: "[t]he goal of our political approach is to serve the economy."³

On the other hand, by leveraging the political and diplomatic capital built over recent decades, the GCC states are increasingly working to elevate their global standing. Efforts to project a positive, modern image of national progress with a view to cultivating new international partnerships not only serve national economic interests but also respond to the GCC states' aspirations to enhance overall global influence, making soft power an integral component of their foreign policies.

In this context, soft power emerges as a strategic asset inextricably tied to foreign policy, questions of security, in particular economic security, and consequently, the logic of sovereignty, which increases competitive ambitions for this resource. The GCC case stands as a distinct example of these dynamics, as, despite shared political, economic, and cultural foundations, interstate relations within the bloc are often shaped by mutual mistrust and competition for regional and international influence. At the same time, these states have engaged in cooperation through the institutional framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The ambitious objectives set

out in the founding Charter refer to aspirations for regional unity, while certain concrete achievements, particularly in the economic sphere, may serve to illustrate movement in that direction. Even though soft power has not emerged as a prioritized area of cooperation for the GCC, progress in certain domains of shared interest within the soft power realm may gradually position the GCC as a soft power actor in its own right, with specific actions and strategies beginning to take shape.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the underlying dichotomy in which the GCC appears both as an arena for soft power competition among its member states, each striving to project a stronger image and gain influence through soft power tools, and as a platform for cooperation toward shared goals which spill over to common initiatives that fall within the realm of soft power.

In line with this objective, the research structure is organized as follows. The first section serves as a theoretical foundation for the work, outlining the main concepts and terms for constructing an analytical framework. The second section examines the scope of action of the GCC states' national soft power policies by placing them in the context of the broader "Vision" national development

³ United Arab Emirates, "The Principles of the 50," *UAE*, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/uae-in-the-future/the-principles-of-the-50>.



strategies and the structural organization of soft power policies governance within the six states. The third section explores GCC states' policies in the soft power realm, addressing them through the lens of competition but also the potential complementarity within the context of economic diversification goals. The following section, using the 2022 World Cup as a case study, demonstrates the practical use of soft power as a strategic tool, its deployment in the context of regional tensions, as well as its cooperative potential among the GCC states. This cooperative potential becomes the main focus of the subsequent section, which examines major joint undertakings in various soft power domains carried out at the GCC regional institutional level. The research concludes by identifying opportunities and challenges for the development of a common regional GCC soft power framework. Throughout the study, the experience of other regional organizations actively engaged in constructing their soft power, namely the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), will be used to provide a comparative perspective on collective soft power projection by regional organizations.

Theoretical outlook

With the soft power concept having had a long-standing presence in

academic and research circles, its usage has extended well beyond the original definition proposed by Nye in his 1990 foundational work (*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*). Writing from an end-of-the-Cold-War perspective and specifically in the context of the United States, Nye defined soft power as the ability in international politics “to get the outcome you want without tangible threats or payoffs” and “to shape the preferences of others” through agenda-setting and the intangible appeal of culture, norms, values, and conducted policies.⁴ However, as the concept of soft power became more widespread in both academic and public discourse, its meaning began to stretch, and the concept is now, at times, being used, as Nye later pointed out himself, almost “as a synonym for anything other than military force.”⁵

This increased usage of the term and its conceptual expansion reflect the growing attention attributed to “non-military” aspects of influence and power projection on the global stage. Moreover, the continuous integration of normative considerations into international relations theory, particularly through the rise of the constructivist paradigm, has enabled the concept of actorness (a capacity to act on the international stage) to include non-material, norms-based elements closely aligned with soft

⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5–14.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, 81.



power. Simultaneously, the evolution of regionalism as an analytical approach in international relations has contributed to the theorization of the actorness of regions in their different forms, including regional organizations.

In this vein, the actorness of regional organizations such as the GCC can now be understood in a broader and more nuanced spectrum. The actorness of such complex international players, as conceptualized by Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, can be observed not only through a limited lens of their ability to formulate a common foreign policy, but can also encompass “the perceptions and expectations of outsiders” or “third parties.” In this context, presence, understood as “the ability to exert influence” and to “shape the perceptions and expectations of others,” emerges as a key attribute of actorness, serving both as a precondition for and a driver of actorness.⁶ Given the apparent conceptual convergence with soft power, which, as Nye emphasizes, can be exercised by different actors and not only states,⁷ it follows that efforts to enhance the soft power potential of a regional organization can contribute to strengthening organizations’ presence and thus actorness. In addition, the

appeal to soft power in external action strategies may be especially relevant for regional organizations, as well as for small and medium-sized states, whose “hard power” capacity may be restricted due to regional competence delegation limitations or lack of material capabilities.

Moreover, the ability to formulate coherent policies together with commitment to shared values and principles stand among the fundamental prerequisites for cohesiveness and fall under the “capability” criterion of actorness, as per Bretherton and Vogler.⁸ In this regard, growing adherence to shared normative ideas enables an actor to adopt something akin to a defined role on the international stage, or, in other words, “a distinctive, high-profile and coherent identity.”⁹ In turn, identity serves as the foundation for what has been termed “regionness,”¹⁰ a concept developed to describe the growing cohesiveness of a region resulting from a gradual process of intensifying and converging regional interactions in various fields and levels. In the words of Björn Hettne, as regionness increases, strengthening both regional cohesion and presence, it helps transform an emerging region from a passive object

⁶ Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1, 5, 33.

⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, 83.

⁸ Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, 9.

⁹ Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualising Europe’s International Role,” *Journal of*

Common Market Studies 31, no. 3 (1993): 307, quoted in Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, 32.

¹⁰ Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, “Theorising the Rise of Regionness,” *New Political Economy* 10, no. 4 (November 2005): 457–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713687778>.



into an active subject, or actor, in international relations. In this sense, regionness, or increased cohesiveness, is intrinsically linked to actorness.¹¹

Therefore, to put it all together, soft power stands as a crucial resource for increasing an actor's presence, which in turn contributes to the strengthening of its actorness. At the same time, both soft power and presence are constructed around the image or "brand" of an actor "in the making," a process that requires building a common narrative that solidifies the actor's own self-conception and shared identity, which in turn enhances regional cohesiveness and, consequently, actorness on the international stage. Pursuing soft power and building actorness stand, as such, as mutually reinforcing processes. In this vein, soft power can be a desirable asset for any actor, including a state or a regional organization.

At the same time, for individual states, enhancing their external brand and presence carries strategic significance, as it serves to assert their

place in the global arena and, by extension, reinforces their sovereignty projection. The question of competence delegation or transfer in the soft power realm to the regional level thus becomes of a sensitive nature. While soft power can bolster the actorness of a regional organization and support the strategic ambitions of its member states, tensions may arise. These tensions can manifest both among individual member states, as well as in their relationship to the regional structure itself, where an increase in the soft power, and consequently, the influence, of one actor may be perceived as a relative loss for another. The case of the GCC, a regional bloc of small and medium-sized states, is of particular interest in this perspective.

Strategic outline of the GCC states' soft power policies

The guiding frameworks for the elaboration of national soft power strategies of the GCC states can be found in their national development plans, known as the "Visions."¹² A set of comprehensive long-term development

¹¹ Björn Hettne, "Regionalism and World Order," in *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, ed. Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne, and Luk Van Langenhove (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 270.

¹² Government of Bahrain, "*Bahrain Economic Vision 2030*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.bahrain.bh/wps/portal/en/BNP/BahrainAtAGlance/Bahrain2030>.

New Kuwait, "*Kuwait Vision 2035: Development Plan*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.newkuwait.gov.kw/plan.aspx>.

Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow-Up Unit, "*Oman Vision 2040*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.oman2040.om/?lang=en>.

National Planning Council, State of Qatar, "*Qatar National Vision 2030*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.npc.qa/en/QNV/pages/default.aspx>.

Vision 2030. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "*Saudi Vision 2030*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>.

United Arab Emirates, "*We the UAE 2031*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://wetheuae.ac/en>; United Arab Emirates, "*The Principles of the 50*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://u.ac/en/about-the-uae/uae-in-the-future/the-principles-of-the-50>;

United Arab Emirates Government, "*UAE Centennial 2071*," accessed May 18, 2025, <https://u.ac/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives->



strategies, the Visions encompass a wide array of aspects that may contribute to economic diversification and the improvement of non-oil economic indicators. Since economic diversification implies attractiveness to others and since the Vision strategies aim to reposition the GCC states on the global stage, they are closely tied to soft power and include elements that draw on this field.

Notably, each Vision strategy contains references to the need to reinforce national identity, emphasizing the promotion of a sense of belonging and citizenship as a foundation for societal cohesion, which is envisaged to be articulated through the protection and celebration of common national historical heritage, cultural legacy, traditions, and values. The Vision strategies also frame culture as a tool for investing in cultural diplomacy to promote national identity, whether by hosting major sporting events, organizing cultural venues, establishing new museums, or developing historical sites. In addition, all Vision strategies place strong emphasis on promoting research and education, which is seen as a tool not only to reinforce national identity but also to project a new image of the six states, building an international reputation for innovation and education,

while simultaneously contributing to the strengthening of national labor markets.

Importantly, each of the Visions also highlights the need to enhance national health systems. In terms of soft power, the correlation of this intention is reflected in the GCC states' emergence as medical tourism destinations.¹³ Furthermore, the commitment to social care extends beyond national borders, particularly through humanitarian diplomacy. For instance, among the six Vision strategies, those of Qatar and the UAE most explicitly emphasize the need for an active role in humanitarian aid, framing it as part of their “moral duty” (UAE) and as action rooted in their “moral and religious values and humanitarian ideals” (Qatar). As such, in 2024, the UAE, through its humanitarian institutions such as the Dubai-based Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI) umbrella organization for a large number of humanitarian and development programs and foundations, including the global humanitarian logistics hub, Dubai Humanitarian,¹⁴ along with the Abu Dhabi-based humanitarian and development organization Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation (KBZF), became the second-largest humanitarian aid contributor to Gaza (surpassed only by the United States), stepped up as the third aid donor to Lebanon, and contributed to relief efforts in Sudan and

[and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/innovation-and-future-shaping/uae-centennial-2071.](#)

¹³ Gulf Research Center, *GCC Tourism Outlook*, 2024, 23, <https://www.grc.net/publication-by-category/24#>.

¹⁴ Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI), “Home,” accessed June 20, 2025, <https://www.almaktouminitiatives.org/en>.



Chad.¹⁵ Similarly, in 2024, Qatar, acting especially through Qatar Charity (QC)¹⁶ but also the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD),¹⁷ provided extensive humanitarian aid to crisis-affected territories, including Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Rohingya refugees, Somalia, and Turkey, among others.

Meanwhile, even without explicitly identifying humanitarian aid as a central element of their international engagement, all other GCC states, in the same vein as Qatar and the UAE, promote themselves as active players in humanitarian diplomacy through official authorities or specialized bodies. Notably, Saudi Arabia, via the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), is actively engaged in humanitarian efforts in Gaza, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, including in partnership with international

organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)¹⁸ or the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁹ In parallel, the Bahrain Royal Humanitarian Foundation (RHF) aspires to be “an international leading organization in humanitarian and charity work,”²⁰ while Oman’s main humanitarian arm, Oman Charitable Organization, aspires to become a “global charitable humanitarian organization [...] in line with Oman vision 2020-2040.”²¹ Kuwait, which explicitly aims to enhance its regional and global profile in philanthropy,²² promotes its status as a “Humanitarian Center,” a title granted in 2014 by the then United Nations (UN) Secretary, Ban Ki-moon, and engages in humanitarian action across the Middle East and Africa²³, building on its long-standing tradition of forging ties with developing countries through its sovereign funds.

¹⁵ Isidora Ciric, “UAE’s 2024 Humanitarian Outreach: A Lifeline for Millions,” *Aletihad*, January 2, 2025, <https://en.aletihad.ae/news/uac/4541175/uac-s-2024-humanitarian-outreach--a-lifeline-for-millions>.

¹⁶ “Qatar Charity’s 2024 Milestones: Bringing Hope to Millions of the Vulnerable Globally,” *ReliefWeb*, January 8, 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/qatar-charitys-2024-milestones-bringing-hope-millions-vulnerable-globally>.

¹⁷ Qatar Fund for Development, “The State of Qatar Sends Two Planes Carrying Humanitarian Aid to Support the Sudanese People,” *Qatar Fund for Development*, March 23, 2024, <https://www.qatarfund.org.qa/project/the-state-of-qatar-sends-two-planes-carrying-humanitarian-aid-to-support-the-sudanese-people/>.

¹⁸ “Saudi Arabia Expands Humanitarian Aid to Gaza with New KSrelief-ICRC Agreement,” *Arab News*, March 1, 2025, <https://arab.news/rd6wb>.

¹⁹ World Health Organization, “WHO Welcomes Funding Support from KSrelief for Critical Health Response

Operations in Sudan, Syria, and Yemen,” *World Health Organization*, May 25, 2024, <https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/who-welcomes-funding-support-from-ksrelief-for-critical-health-response-operations-in-sudan-syria-and-yemen.html>.

²⁰ Bahrain Government, *Royal Humanitarian Foundation*, <https://www.rhf.gov.bh>.

²¹ Oman Charitable Organisation, “About Us,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://jood.om/en/Board/CharityProfile/about/8656>.

²² *Kuwait Mobilizes Development Efforts to Transform Kuwait into a Financial, Cultural, and Institutional Leader in the Region by 2035*, *New Kuwait*, 3, accessed May 19, 2025, https://www.newkuwait.gov.kw/image/NewKuwait_CampaignLaunchEvent.pdf.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Kuwait, “*Kuwait as a Humanitarian Center*,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.mofa.gov.kw/en/pages/kuwait-as-a-humanitarian-center>.



Overall, the GCC states have increasingly been recognized as major global providers of humanitarian assistance. This recognition applies to the GCC states not only in terms of scale but also in the strategic intent of a purposeful use of humanitarian aid as a tool of their policies.²⁴ As seen by J. O'Hagan, humanitarian diplomacy, as an element of foreign policy, "provides states with an opportunity to express international empathy and solidarity and can enhance the reputation of a state and provide valuable tools for building relationships of trust and cooperation."²⁵ At the same time, with their established extensive network of humanitarian initiatives and foundations, their partnerships with international bodies as well as through leveraging their strategic geographic location for the purpose of humanitarian action (as exemplified by Dubai Humanitarian hub), the GCC states are determined to demonstrate their commitment to carrying out life-saving tasks in a competent manner in order to change the paradigm of perception and to establish themselves as more serious actors who intend to actively contribute to solving the problem at hand.

On top of that, the Vision strategies stress the commitment to environmental protection and

sustainable development. Multiple major environmental events were hosted in the GCC in recent years, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP28 in Dubai, UAE, in November 2023, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) COP16 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in December 2024, as well as World Environment Day 2024 also hosted by Saudi Arabia. These events, along with more already programmed in the years to come, contribute to projecting a new image of the GCC states as key international players in environmental and climate diplomacy, as well as in the global energy transition.²⁶

Additionally, the Vision programs explicitly articulate the objective of enhancing the international standing of the GCC states, and include goals such as improving their positions in various global rankings (economic, university, logistics, government effectiveness, health, and others), becoming leaders in specific domains, or, more broadly, as expressed in the UAE's Centennial 2071 plan, aiming to "fortify the country's reputation and its soft power." As a reflection of these ambitions, GCC states achieved high positions in different soft power rankings, such as the Global Soft Power Index (GSPI). In particular, in the 2024 edition, the UAE ranked 10th

²⁴ Ghassan Elkahoul and Sansom Milton, "The Evolution of the Gulf States as Humanitarian Donors," *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 12 (July 10, 2023): 2246–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2229742>.

²⁵ O. Bogatyreva, "Humanitarian Diplomacy: Modern Concepts and Approaches," *Herald of the Russian*

Academy of Sciences 92, suppl. 14 (2022): S1361, <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622140042>.

²⁶ Mohamed Abdelraouf, *Environment at the Core in GCC Countries*, Gulf Research Center, 2025 *Strategic Dossier*, January 2025, 34–37.



globally, scoring the highest marks and top position on the key “strong and stable economy” attribute, as well as raising their reputation profile from hosting the EXPO 2020 and COP 28. Saudi Arabia ranked 18th, benefiting, as the Index report emphasizes, from enhanced international perceptions due to high-profile investments in tourism and sports, while Qatar, positioned 21st, advanced its standing through the global visibility gained from hosting major events like the FIFA World Cup. The three states demonstrated the greatest improvements in the ranking since the inception of the Index (in 2020), which underlines their deliberate conscious efforts to expand soft power.²⁷ Although the 2025 edition of the Index recorded slight declines in the ranking for Saudi Arabia (20th) and Qatar (22nd),²⁸ the planned upcoming global-scale events across various domains and the continuous investments in initiatives aimed at uplifting their attractiveness reflect a consistent commitment to strategic soft power expansion.

The Vision program documents have also notably served as key reference points and foundational frameworks for numerous policy actions

across the GCC states. Within this framework, various sector-specific strategies and government-led initiatives have been developed, many of which are directly aligned with the enhancement of soft power. For example, in 2019, Saudi Arabia adopted its Cultural Vision, which aims to enable culture “to contribute to economic growth” and to enhance national identity.²⁹ That same year, the Kingdom also launched its National Tourism Strategy, explicitly linking it to the goals of Vision 2030 by, among other objectives, promoting economic diversification and strengthening national identity.³⁰ Launched in 2020, the National Strategy of the Saudi Sports for All Federation is also linked to Vision 2030 and aims to transform the Kingdom into “a global leader in sports for all.”³¹ Furthermore, in line with Nye’s conceptualization of public diplomacy as a pivotal instrument for the promotion of soft power,³² Riyadh has undertaken efforts to strengthen “the image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia locally, regionally and

²⁷ Brand Finance, *Global Soft Power Index 2024* (London: Brand Finance, 2024), 6, 41–42, <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2024-digital.pdf>.

²⁸ Brand Finance, *Global Soft Power Index 2025* (London: Brand Finance, 2025), 19, 41–42, <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2025-digital.pdf>.

²⁹ Ministry of Culture, *Our Cultural Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Government of Saudi Arabia,

2019), 12, <https://my.gov.sa/en/content/culture#section-2>.

³⁰ Ministry of Tourism, Government of Saudi Arabia, *National Tourism Strategy*, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://mt.gov.sa/about/national-tourism-strategy>.

³¹ Saudi Sports for All Federation, “*About Us*,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://sportsforall.com.sa/about-us/>.

³² Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 94–109.



internationally” through its Center for Government Communication.³³

Other GCC states have also adopted a range of sector-specific strategies and initiatives. While the scope of these initiatives may vary, all GCC countries have implemented dedicated strategies for tourism. This shared focus underscores, as Nazar Hilal points out, their recognition of tourism as “a preferred economic diversification mechanism.” The sector’s strategic value lies in its labor-intensive nature and its potential to generate employment opportunities, particularly for nationals. It also provides opportunities for development in regions where other sectors, such as agriculture, may be limited by environmental constraints. Overall, tourism stimulates activity across multiple sectors, including hospitality, transportation, construction, and the wider private sector. Beyond its economic impact, tourism also leverages existing cultural, heritage, and archaeological assets, allowing these to be strategically employed in constructing place identity and promoting nation brand, thus enhancing international visibility. Furthermore, tourism may serve to shape global

perceptions and counter negative images, becoming an important reputational tool.³⁴

Among the six states, the UAE has developed the region’s most formalized and centralized soft power framework. The UAE’s soft power “ecosystem” is overseen by the Soft Power Council, established in 2017 as part of the broader Emirates government system.³⁵ In September 2017, the Council introduced the Soft Power Strategy as a plan “to increase the country’s global reputation abroad by highlighting its identity, heritage, culture and contributions [...] to the world.”³⁶ The strategy explicitly outlines six main pillars that constitute the UAE’s public diplomacy framework: humanitarian diplomacy, scientific and academic diplomacy, national representatives diplomacy, people diplomacy, cultural and media diplomacy, and economic diplomacy. These domains also align with the aforementioned key elements found in the Vision programs of GCC states. To support the implementation of the strategy, the UAE established the Office for Public and Cultural Diplomacy in 2018, tasked to strengthen international cooperation.³⁷ That same year, the UAE

³³ Center for Government Communication, “About,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://cgc.gov.sa/en/about>.

³⁴ Nazar Hilal, “Tourism in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries as a Priority for Economic Prospects and Diversification,” *Journal of Tourism & Hospitality* 9, no. 7 (November 2020): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.35248/2167-0269.20.9.451>.

³⁵ United Arab Emirates, “The political system,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/political-system-and-government>.

³⁶ United Arab Emirates, “The UAE Soft Power Strategy,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/strategies-plans-and-visions-until-2021/the-uae-soft-power-strategy>.

³⁷ UAE Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy (OPCD), “About,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://opcd.ae/about-opcd/>.



also launched the Government Experience Exchange Program as a tool for direct collaboration with governments of “countries worldwide” through sharing the UAE’s “expertise and best practices.” This initiative has enabled the UAE to build partnerships with a number of international partners,³⁸ further underscoring the strategic dimension of soft power projection.

GCC states’ soft power policies: between competition and complementarity

Setting similar national goals and striving for comparable outcomes within a set time frame inevitably affects competitive dynamics among GCC states. These competitive ambitions intersect with the broader regional political context, wherein Gulf countries aspire to increase their influence in the Middle East as well as to position themselves as the leading regional reference point in the eyes of the global audience. The perception of rivalry is especially manifest among the three dominant GCC powers, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. As the accumulation of soft power serves their shared objective to expand global influence, competition in the soft power

realm has emerged as a defining feature of the contemporary Gulf political landscape.

The competition is multidimensional and unfolds across a broad spectrum of domains, ranging from hosting high-profile global events to engaging in more targeted and symbolic actions. Among the more symbolic illustrations of this dynamic is the race for the tallest building, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE compete for symbolic architectural supremacy as a way to visually dominate the skyline in a symbol of modernity and leadership. The construction of Saudi Arabia’s Kingdom Tower in Jeddah, initiated in 2013 and designed to surpass the UAE’s Burj Khalifa (completed in 2010), will now be accompanied by the project of Saudi Arabia’s “Rise Tower,”³⁹ which is projected to reach double the height of Burj Khalifa.

Symbolically, the UAE’s Burj Khalifa in Dubai remains the point of reference for architectural comparison and competition. At the same time, on the ground, the UAE, and Dubai in particular, pioneered branding strategies, combined with economic liberalization and openness. The economic and diplomatic success of this model

³⁸ United Arab Emirates, “The Government Experience Exchange Programme,” accessed May 19, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/digital-uae/digital-transformation/cooperation-and-collaboration/the-uae-s-regional-and-international-cooperation-in-digital-transformation/the-government-experience-exchange-programme>.

³⁹ Harvey Geh, “RISE AGAIN: Saudi’s Insane Plan for World’s Tallest Skyscraper ‘The Rise Tower’ – a \$5b Project Twice the Height of Burj Khalifa,” *The Irish Sun*, April 8, 2025, <https://www.thesun.ie/news/15015749/saudi-skyscraper-plan/>



encouraged others in the region to adopt a similar strategic approach, where Dubai became not only the main model for others to follow but also a primary competitor. This competitive logic applies not only to interstate regional relations but may also be apparent in the relations within the UAE federation itself, namely between the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. For instance, the announcement in 2006 of the creation of the Abu Dhabi's "cultural district" on Saadiyat Island, with the *Louvre Abu Dhabi* inaugurated in 2017, at its heart, along with the forthcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (expected in 2026), was seen by some experts as driven by the ambition of the richest emirate in the federation "to outdo Dubai in cultural liberalism" and "to take from Dubai the marks of sovereignty associated with tourism."⁴⁰

The implications of the museum diplomacy in the Gulf may go beyond the objective of crafting a new image as cultural capitals. As Alexandre Kazerouni remarks, Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), inaugurated in 2008, opened the way for a new type of museum embracing a more "modern," outward-looking paradigm expressed through its architecture, exhibition strategies, and international orientation. While more modest in scale, it positioned Doha as a center for Islamic

culture. It also projected an image of modern Islam with open and pluralistic allure, which, in the context of Qatar's strategically important political and security partnerships with the United States and European countries, also served as an instrument to meet its partners' expectations, contributing to solidifying cooperation. In addition, the establishment of the MIA also reflected an attempt to define Qatar's cultural identity in distinction from that of Saudi Arabia and, thus, to distance itself from Riyadh's dominant religious narrative within and outside Qatar, a delicate but strategic task, given the shared Hanbali-Wahhabi religious tradition between the two states.⁴¹

Another sector of strategic aspirations and competition among GCC states is education diplomacy, which is unfolding in particular through investment in international education hubs. Qatar's Education City, launched in 1997 and formally inaugurated in 2003 under one of Qatar's key soft power tools in the field of education named the Qatar Foundation, is a prominent example, hosting branches of world-renowned institutions such as Georgetown University (since 2005), Weill Cornell Medical College (2001), and France's top business school, *Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC) Paris* (2010), among others. Dubai was the

⁴⁰ Originally in French and translated into English by our means from Alexandre Kazerouni, "Musées et soft power dans le Golfe Persique," *Pouvoirs: Revue d'Études*

Constitutionnelles et Politiques 152, no. 1 (January 2015): 96, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pouv.152.0087>.

⁴¹ Alexandre Kazerouni, "Musées et soft power dans le Golfe Persique," 90-95.



next one to step in, setting up its Dubai Knowledge Village (known today as Dubai Knowledge Park) in 2003 and establishing there the Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), which hosts Heriot-Watt University Dubai (since 2005) and University of Birmingham Dubai (since 2018). Abu Dhabi's strategic responses to Dubai's stronghold in education diplomacy were the opening of the *Sorbonne Université Abu Dhabi* (2006) and New York University Abu Dhabi (2010). All these partnerships aim not only to elevate the region's scientific and academic profile but also to strengthen bilateral relations with the GCC states' key international partners from which the prestigious institutions originate.

At a broader level, competition over global visibility through sports mega-events has become one of the most dynamic manifestations of Gulf rivalry. Bahrain was the first (in the GCC, but also the Middle East) to host a Formula 1 (F1) Grand Prix in 2004, followed by Abu Dhabi in 2009. Both now hold distinct annual races in the F1 calendar with their own branding. Qatar and Saudi Arabia's Jeddah city joined the circuit in 2021. With the FIFA World Cup 2022 bid won by Qatar, Saudi Arabia accelerated its international bids by securing the Asian Winter Games 2029 and the FIFA World Cup 2034. Moreover, Abu Dhabi United Group's takeover of Manchester City football club in 2008, Qatar Sports Investments' acquisition of *Paris Saint-Germain*

(PSG) in 2011–2012, Saudi Arabia's growing involvement in global sports, notably through the Public Investment Fund's (PIF) takeover of Newcastle United football club in 2021 and the establishment and funding of the LIV Golf league, along with the domestic league's high-profile signings of global football stars, all underscore an effort to turn sports diplomacy into a more structured and sustained form of influence projection.

Recently, this competition has expanded into the space sector. The UAE's Mohammed bin Rashid Space Centre has led efforts through the launch of the Emirates Mars Mission Hope Probe from the Tanegashima Space Center (Japan) in 2020 (first Arab probe to Mars), the 2022 Rashid lunar rover attempt launched from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station (USA), as well as the sending of the first Emirati astronaut, Hazzaa Al Mansoori, to the International Space Station, ISS (also first Arab and first GCC astronaut to ISS) in 2019 from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan operated by Russia. In 2023, Saudi Arabia sent two astronauts to the ISS aboard a US Axiom Space mission, including Rayyanah Barnawi, the first Arab woman astronaut. On the one hand, these steps contribute to reputation-building efforts that aim to project innovation and technological advancement, while also signaling a new openness and socio-cultural transformation within the GCC states. On the other hand, cooperation with



international partners in the preparation and launch of the space missions, for example during the training of the Emirati astronaut in Russia as part of a UAE-Roscosmos (Russian Space Agency) agreement,⁴² underscores one of the strategic features of the GCC states' space diplomacy, which contributes to forging and deepening international partnerships and cooperation.

Meanwhile, all these efforts are nested within the broader context of economic diversification. Within this context, energy transition has become another particularly sharp aspect of competition. In this domain, soft power, in terms of projecting an image of environmentally engaged and responsible actors, intersects with "hard" strategic interests of retaining global energy relevance. The similarity of natural resources and climatic conditions across the GCC states drives competition for international market share and influence in the clean energy sector. This includes efforts to become global leaders in hydrogen production, ammonia exports, and renewable energy initiatives. To provide examples, in September 2020, Saudi Arabia became

the first country in the world to export blue ammonia commercially, while in October 2021, Saudi Aramco dedicated its largest Jafurah shale gas field to the production of blue hydrogen. In its turn, in May 2021, the UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) announced plans to build a world-scale blue ammonia facility, while at the November 2021 COP 26, the UAE's Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure unveiled the "UAE Hydrogen Leadership Roadmap," targeting, by 2030, 25% share of the global low-carbon hydrogen market. Later, in August 2022, Qatar announced its intentions to build the world's largest blue ammonia facility, while already developing green and blue hydrogen projects in cooperation with the UK.⁴³ At the same time, mega-projects such as the UAE's Masdar City, initiated in 2006 and presented as "a pioneering urban development [... and] a global leader in sustainable city design and innovation"⁴⁴ primarily powered by clean energy, along with Saudi Arabia's NEOM City, currently under construction and designed as a "100% renewable energy system,"⁴⁵ can stand as examples of concrete expressions of this competition in the clean energy field.

⁴² United Arab Emirates, "The UAE Astronaut Programme," accessed May 19, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/industry-science-and-technology/the-uae-astronaut-programme>

⁴³ Glnar Eskandar, "The GCC's Competing, Not Complementary Economic Diversification Trajectories," in *Gulf Cooperation Council Achievements and Challenges: Navigating Regional and International Relations*, ed. Ashraf Mohamed Keshk and Mona Saad

AlResais (UK: Ethics International Press Ltd, 2025), 8–11.

⁴⁴ Neesha Salian, "Masdar City's Mohamed Al Breiki on Its Net-Zero Journey," *Gulf Business*, January 15, 2025, <https://gulfbusiness.com/masdar-city-mohamed-albreiki-on-its-netzero-focus/>.

⁴⁵ NEOM, "Environment," NEOM, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/about/our-values/code-of-conduct/our-world/environment#why-it-matters>.



While this overview focuses on select sectors and does not address areas such as media or aviation, where competition has become a prominent feature of regional dynamics, it reveals key patterns in the evolving landscape of soft power competition among GCC states. Overall, this competition undermines the potential for complementarity within the GCC in terms of economic diversification and, more broadly, hinders the increase of collective actorness.

Meanwhile, there are also efforts by GCC states to establish themselves in particular niches and create distinctive brands for themselves. For instance, the “UAE Nation Brand,” with its recognizable “seven lines” logo, promotes the narrative of the UAE as a “melting pot”, a “global trade center”, and a land with a “futuristic vision.”⁴⁶ Besides, the country seeks to present itself as a destination with well-connected infrastructure, diverse entertainment venues, international event-hosting capabilities, and strong appeal for hospitality investment. Saudi Arabia emphasizes its natural beauty, authentic historical and cultural heritage, and religious sites. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE also aim to position themselves as reference points for

adventure and sports-related tourism. Furthermore, as mentioned above, GCC states hold high positions in the global Medical Tourism Index, in particular the UAE and Oman.⁴⁷

To elaborate on the case of Oman, its distinct nature and cultural heritage enable the country to craft a distinct place identity for its nation brand. Traditional cities and sites, a diverse natural landscape, wildlife, and nature-based activities stand at the forefront of Oman’s distinctive image. While also promoting beach tourism like other countries in the region, Oman places greater emphasis on cultural festivals, natural environments, local heritage and archeology, aiming at the ecotourism niche.⁴⁸ On top of that, in January 2025, Muscat launched its “unified promotional identity for the Sultanate of Oman,” intending to “reinforce positive perceptions of Oman locally, regionally and globally” through a targeted communication campaign, and to highlight Oman “as a destination for investment, tourism, and as a place to live”. Notably, the new campaign and the designed logo, symbolizing “Partnership” (*Sharaka* in Arabic), also aim to advance Oman’s stance in regional and international relations by emphasizing its collaborative nature.⁴⁹ Thus, in line with Joseph Nye’s

⁴⁶ UAE Nation Brand, “About,” accessed May 20, 2025, <https://www.nationbrand.ae/en/about>.

⁴⁷ Gulf Research Center, GCC Tourism Outlook (2024), 9, 22, 23, <https://www.grc.net/publication-by-category/24#>.

⁴⁸ Nazar Hilal, “Tourism in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries as a Priority for Economic Prospects and Diversification,” 5.

⁴⁹ Foreign Ministry of Oman, “His Majesty Launches New Promotional Identity for Oman,” January 8, 2025,



theorization of soft power, where actors' behavior and policies on the international stage become part of their soft power assets,⁵⁰ Oman's long-standing mediation approach, promotion of good-neighborly diplomacy, and non-interference stance serve as important instruments in empowering its international influence.

Overall, despite competitive dynamics among the states in the region, emerging efforts to establish niche specializations suggest the potential for a complementary regional presence on the world stage. Besides, while this competition is driven by national ambitions, it also has the potential to generate positive regional spillovers. More precisely, as each country seeks to assert its identity and expand its influence, the region, as a whole, benefits from increased global visibility. Furthermore, the geographical proximity and plans for infrastructural integration, most notably through the development of the GCC railway project, offer opportunities for tourism and economic synergies. This logic of interlinked benefits, despite competitive undercurrents and political tensions, will be further examined in the next section, which uses the case of Qatar's organization of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to examine how the event catalyzed

both rivalry and cooperation within the Gulf region.

Qatar World Cup 2022: GCC soft power competition and cooperation amid tensions

In December 2010, Qatar won its bid to host the 2022 World Cup, marking the first successful bid by a country from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. From the outset, Qatar framed its bid as a shared opportunity for the entire Middle East, the Arab world, and the GCC region. This narrative initially garnered support from regional organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Arab League, and the GCC, all of which were united in "denouncing the tendentious campaign attempting to undermine the eligibility of the State of Qatar and the questioning of its right to organize the World Cup in 2022."⁵¹ Later on, in 2015, shortly after the end of the GCC diplomatic crisis (March-November 2014) that opposed Doha against Riyadh, Manama, and Abu Dhabi, the GCC, through the statements of its Information Ministers, reiterated support to Doha at the regional level by describing Qatar's World Cup hosting as "a success for all the states of the GCC" and calling "to confront through the media anyone who seeks to question the

<https://www.fm.gov.om/his-majesty-launches-new-promotional-identity-for-oman/>.

⁵⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 11.

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, "Arab League Support Qatar's Right to Host 2022 World Cup,"

accessed May 20, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/2015/06/21/arab-league-support-qatar%27s-right-to-host-2022-world-cup>.



eligibility of the State of Qatar to organize the 2022 World Cup.”⁵²

Indeed, the event stood out not only as an opportunity for Qatar to achieve global outreach through the projection of its newly crafted national image, but also as an opportunity to foster closer regional cooperation within the Gulf, enhance cohesiveness, and promote a collective effort to reshape the region’s image worldwide. However, the initial cooperative momentum was undermined by the intra-GCC rift between June 2017 and January 2021, which included the blockade of Qatar by the “quartet” of states, regrouping Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt, and marked “the most serious rupture”⁵³ in intra-GCC relations since the organization’s establishment.

The 2017 intra-GCC rift, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the earlier 2014 GCC diplomatic crisis, reinforced concerns associated with hosting the tournament in the Middle East. These concerns had already been expressed in FIFA’s 2010 Bid Evaluation Report, which had rated Qatar’s bid as presenting a higher risk compared to most of the other competing nations. Besides, beyond the international media’s attention to the perceived controversies surrounding Qatar’s domestic human rights record, what

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen describes as a “climate of uncertainty” over Qatar’s hosting capabilities was intensified by disruptions to supply chains at a critical phase of Qatar’s preparation efforts, in particular during the construction of stadiums and associated infrastructure like the Doha metro. This uncertainty was further exacerbated by the quartet’s portrayal of Qatar as a regional and international security threat and as a state that backs terrorism, along with speculative incitements about revoking its rights to host the tournament.⁵⁴

However, Qatar’s prompt response to the crisis and swift adaptation to the new reality, ensuring the rerouting of supplies, particularly construction materials, played a key role in the resilience of its global perception. In addition, Doha mobilized soft power and public diplomacy in a targeted and strategic manner, presenting itself as a reliable partners while contrasting this image with the portrayed inconsistency of its rift-initiating neighbors. Its officials also intensified international media engagement to promote Qatar’s narrative as a “victim” of political powerplay. Furthermore, Doha increased funding to major international humanitarian and development agencies (such as UNICEF, UNDP, UNRWA) to reinforce its image as a committed

⁵² Reuters, “Gulf States Defend Qatar 2022 World Cup,” *Reuters*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sports/gulf-states-defend-qatar-2022-world-cup-idUSKBN0OR14H/>.

⁵³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup,” *Journal of Arabian*

Studies 13, no. 1 (2024): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2024.2354672>.

⁵⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup,” 12, 14, 16–18.



“global citizen,” and adopted a “rule-of-law approach” by appealing to international organizations and initiating legal proceedings against the actions of the quartet states (such as those within the ICJ, ICAO, or WTO).⁵⁵

These efforts illustrated a deliberate application of soft power and public diplomacy, designed to counteract “hard power” pressures. Overall, Qatar’s soft power response to the crisis, while resisting the initial list of demands issued by the quartet, fostered its global standing and influence. The successful hosting of the tournament on schedule, despite both the blockade and the subsequent pandemic, further projected Qatar’s resilience and elevated its image internationally.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the approaching World Cup also served to accelerate internal GCC reconciliation. Missed opportunities for cooperation in the tournament’s preparation, such as the limited participation of Saudi and Emirati companies in construction tenders,⁵⁷ coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic and the resulting economic challenges. In addition, the prolonged rift and the inability of the quartet states to win the public narrative and avoid being seen as the instigators of an internal “family” dispute negatively impacted their soft power and

international image, which, during the same period, coincided with other accumulated reputational setbacks. In this vein, the intra-regional reconciliation formalized by the Al-Ula Agreement on January 5, 2021, was not only a diplomatic “breakthrough” (as it was largely described in different media) but also a strategic reset. It opened the door to renewed regional cooperation and joint action on shared challenges. This new rapprochement translated into several initiatives, particularly in the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

For example, the lifting of the blockade, combined with the geographical proximity of neighboring GCC countries, enabled football fans to be accommodated across the region, offering additional economic benefits to Qatar’s neighbors. In this context, in May 2022, Qatar Airways, Flydubai, Oman Air, Kuwait Airways, and Saudi Arabian Airlines (Saudia) signed a partnership agreement to operate shuttle flights for match ticket holders, connecting Doha with Dubai, Jeddah, Kuwait City, Muscat, and Riyadh throughout the tournament. The public campaign around the partnership initiative branded these carriers as the “exclusive Match Day Shuttle airlines,” allowing Qatar to highlight regional cooperation and reiterate the message that “Qatar 2022 is a FIFA World Cup for

⁵⁵ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup,” 19-21.

⁵⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup,” 24-25.

⁵⁷ Richard Thompson, “How Will the Crisis Affect Qatar’s Projects Market?” *Middle East Business Intelligence*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.meed.com/how-will-the-crisis-affect-qatars-projects-market/>.



the entire region.” The participating airlines also emphasized the opportunity to strengthen Gulf connectivity, support social and economic development, and promote the cultural richness of the region.⁵⁸ Soon afterwards, in June 2022, Air Arabia, connecting Sharjah to Doha,⁵⁹ and Etihad Airways, linking Abu Dhabi to Doha,⁶⁰ also joined the regional shuttle flight partnership.

In addition, the relaunched regional cooperation helped Qatar ease potential accommodation difficulties and address one of the key concerns raised in FIFA’s 2010 bid evaluation report, namely the reliance on a single point of entry and exit via Doha’s Hamad International Airport.⁶¹ For instance, Saudi Arabia, by increasing cross-border shuttle bus services, provided an alternative gateway for World Cup visitors. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman collaborated with Qatar to integrate the tournament entry document, the Hayya Card, with multi-entry visa privileges to their respective territories. This allowed international fans to move freely between several

GCC countries, promoting regional connectivity. This effort was reinforced by Qatar’s subsequent decision to grant free entry to GCC citizens and residents, without the need for a Hayya Card, contributing to increased travel in the region.⁶²

As such, the hosting of the 2022 World Cup not only represented a major global opportunity for Qatar’s soft power projection but also stood as a backdrop against which intra-GCC political dynamics and regional public diplomacy efforts unfolded. For both Qatar and its neighbors, the event demonstrated the strategic value of regional cooperation as a way of enhancing their collective presence on the global stage.

At the same time, while the World Cup provided an impetus for advancing regional cooperation, the implementation of the full potential of this momentum faced certain limitations. For example, Kuwait opted not to participate in the Hayya Card multi-entry visa system, despite multiple rounds of discussions between Qatari

⁵⁸ Qatar Airways, “Qatar Airways Partners with flydubai, Kuwait Airways, Oman Air, and Saudia to Bring Football Fans Match Day Shuttle Flights for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™,” *Qatar Airways*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.qatarairways.com/press-releases/en-WW/214957-qatar-airways-partners-with-flydubai-kuwait-airways-oman-air-and-saudia-to-bring-football-fans-match-day-shuttle-flights-for-the-fifa->

⁵⁹ Gulf News, “Air Arabia to Launch 14 Daily Shuttle Flights to Doha during FIFA World Cup,” *Gulf News*, June 24, 2022, <https://gulfnews.com/business/aviation/air-arabia-to-launch-14-daily-shuttle-flights-to-doha-during-fifa-world-cup-1.1656072833881>.

⁶⁰ Gulf News, “Qatar World Cup: Etihad Airways to Operate 42 Weekly Flights to Doha, Plans Charter Services,” *Gulf News*, June 20, 2022, <https://gulfnews.com/business/aviation/qatar-world-cup-etihad-airways-to-operate-42-weekly-flights-to-doha-plans-charter-services-1.88260069>.

⁶¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup,” 16.

⁶² Mehran Haghiri, “The 2022 World Cup Is a Win for GCC Cooperation,” *Arab Gulf States Institute*, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://agsi.org/analysis/the-2022-world-cup-is-a-win-for-gcc-cooperation/>.



and Kuwaiti officials, as well as internal deliberations within Kuwait's Council of Ministers.⁶³ Nevertheless, Kuwait still demonstrated its support for Qatar's hosting of the tournament by participating, as mentioned above, in the daily shuttle flights partnership, facilitated by the possibility of visa-on-arrival access for many nationalities. Although no specific reason was officially provided for Kuwait's absence from the Hayya Card arrangement, the decision appears to have been rather driven by technical or infrastructural considerations.

In contrast, Bahrain was the only GCC state that remained largely on the sidelines of the cooperation initiatives surrounding the tournament. In the aftermath of the Al-Ula reconciliation agreement, relations between Qatar and Bahrain continued to be strained, as the two countries did not establish a bilateral working group to address mutual challenges, an initiative that had been pursued with other former quartet states.⁶⁴ In this context, Bahraini carriers did not participate in the regional shuttle flight agreement. Direct flights between Bahrain and Qatar were only resumed in May 2023,⁶⁵ more than two years after the Al-Ula agreement, which had aimed to restore diplomatic ties and reopen land, sea, and air connections. Bahrain

also refrained from integrating the Hayya Card into its visa regime, and neither sent an official delegation to the tournament's opening ceremony nor held events intended to attract World Cup visitors to the country.⁶⁶

Therefore, political tensions and unresolved issues among GCC states pose challenges to deeper regional cooperation. The "breakthrough" of the January 2021 Al-Ula agreements, although allowing for reengaging in regional cooperation, did not result in the immediate restoration of diplomatic ties among all parties to the dispute. While Saudi Arabia and Egypt reestablished full diplomatic relations with Qatar and reopened embassies in 2021, the normalization of relations of Bahrain and the UAE with Qatar was only achieved in the spring-summer of 2023. This lack of unity, cooperative approach, and coordinated engagement may not only hamper efforts to develop a cohesive framework for collective soft power projection but may also undermine existing individual soft power strategies by generating reputational costs. In this context, strengthening collaboration becomes not only collectively beneficial but also individually important from a strategic perspective for each member state. The next section will examine the joint

⁶³ Mehran Haghirián, "The 2022 World Cup Is a Win for GCC Cooperation."

⁶⁴ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup," 22.

⁶⁵ Ibrahim Khazen, "Qatar, Bahrain Resume Direct Flights after 6-Year Break," *Anadolu Agency*, May 25,

2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/qatar-bahrain-resume-direct-flights-after-6-year-break/2905693>.

⁶⁶ Mehran Haghirián, "The 2022 World Cup Is a Win for GCC Cooperation."



efforts of the GCC states in the soft power realm and the potential they generate for fostering greater regional cohesiveness, or, in regionalism terms, regionness.

GCC collective soft power action

Importantly, amid the internal GCC rift, culture emerged as an area of joint engagement. On October 10, 2019, during a meeting in Muscat, GCC Ministers of Culture endorsed the Cultural Strategy for GCC States (2020–2030). Around that time, on October 29, 2019, Kuwait's Emir publicly called, yet again, for an end to the regional diplomatic dispute during the opening of the new parliamentary term.⁶⁷ Thus, interestingly, acting as a primary component for fostering shared identity and regional cohesion, culture emerged as a focal point of GCC joint action at a time of strained relations and calls for the cessation of the dispute.

Besides, during the Muscat meeting, the GCC Ministers of Culture⁶⁸ agreed for Gulf states to participate in international cultural events and to engage with international cultural institutions and organizations. Indeed, such external cultural cooperation may

not only enhance the Gulf's visibility on the international stage but also help consolidate a sense of collective identity through joint interaction with external actors. The Ministers further approved the alignment of cultural activities and events with the Gulf Cultural Strategy and agreed on joint cultural work regulations. While seemingly technical, the development of common regulatory frameworks can play a subtle but significant role in identity building. For instance, from a neofunctionalist perspective, cooperation on technical aspects may produce a "spillover effect" into other spheres, encouraging broader collaboration among member states, while the constructivist view on the topic is that the formulation of shared norms and regulatory practices helps construct a common frame of reference, increasing mutual understanding and reinforcing a shared identity.

Moreover, on the sidelines of the meeting, a ceremony was held to honor artists from across the Gulf countries.⁶⁹ To make a parallel with another regional organization, the European Union explicitly identifies culture as a unifying force, the "cement that binds Europe together."⁷⁰ In the EU common action, support for local artists and cultural

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, "Kuwait's Emir: Gulf Dispute 'No Longer Acceptable or Tolerable,'" *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/29/kuwaits-emir-gulf-dispute-no-longer-acceptable-or-tolerable>.

⁶⁸ Gulf Times, "GCC Culture Ministers Endorse Cultural Strategy 2020–2030," *Gulf Times*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/643985/gcc-culture-ministers-endorse-cultural-strategy-2020-2030>.

⁶⁹ Gulf Times, "GCC Culture Ministers Endorse Cultural Strategy 2020–2030."

⁷⁰ European Commission, "Speech by President Barroso: 'Culture: the Cement That Binds Europe Together,'" April 4, 2013, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/S_PEECH_13_280.



initiatives stands as a deliberate policy tool to cultivate a shared European identity. Emphasizing artistic expressions, particularly at the local level, is seen as a way to foster both individual and local collective self-identification with the broader European regional space, promoting a sense of mutual contribution to a common cultural landscape. Programs such as Creative Europe⁷¹ are examples of how cultural policy can serve as a practical instrument for identity building and regional cohesion.

On top of that, the meeting of the GCC Ministers of Culture took place in parallel with that of the Ministers responsible for Tourism. As a result, discussions included the development of a joint vision linking tourism and culture in the GCC, once again pointing to the interconnection between cultural heritage, shared identity, international visibility, and, more broadly, the economic and strategic dimensions of soft power. In this context, the gathered Ministers also decided to outline events and initiatives within the “Living in the Gulf” joint strategic program, adopted to

foster a sense of “belonging and citizenship.”⁷²

Furthermore, cooperation in the tourism field among the GCC, marked by collaboration between central and local authorities, national airlines, and private institutions, resulted in the adoption of the Gulf Tourism Strategy 2023-2030 by the GCC Ministers of Tourism on November 14, 2022, just ahead of the FIFA World Cup. The strategy was subsequently endorsed by the GCC Supreme Council in December 2022.⁷³ The document envisages making the GCC countries “the leading tourist destination in the world for regional and international tourists,” with an overarching aim of contributing to the “diversification and economic growth of the GCC countries.”⁷⁴

However, what stands out in the strategy is the intention to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are shared more equitably across member states. Indeed, the indicated goals, such as “joint promotional programs and marketing campaigns, [...] the exchange of experiences and knowledge in the

⁷¹ Magdalena Pasikowska-Schnass and Agnieszka Widuto, *Culture and Regional Development*, Members' Research Service, (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2022), 8, 11, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733600/EPRS_BRI%282022%29733600_EN.pdf.

⁷² Gulf Times, “GCC Culture Ministers Endorse Cultural Strategy 2020–2030.”

⁷³ Oxford Business Group, “GCC Promotes the Region as a Leading Tourism Destination,” *Oxford Business Group*, accessed May 20, 2025, [https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/saudi-](https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/saudi-arabia/2023-report/tourism/cross-border-connections-gulf-countries-develop-strategic-partnerships-to-promote-the-region-as-a-leading-international-travel-destination-analysis/)

[arabia/2023-report/tourism/cross-border-connections-gulf-countries-develop-strategic-partnerships-to-promote-the-region-as-a-leading-international-travel-destination-analysis/](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733600/EPRS_BRI%282022%29733600_EN.pdf).

⁷⁴ Translated into English from وزارة التراث والسياحة (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman), “الاستراتيجية الخليجية للسياحة تعزز التكامل السياحي المشترك” [The GCC Tourism Strategy Strengthens Joint Gulf Tourism Integration], accessed May 20, 2025, <https://mht.gov.om/ar/news/213-الخليجية-الاستراتيجية-للسياحة-المشترك-الخليجي-السياحي-التكامل-تعزز-للسياحة>.



field of tourism statistics and data,” along with the aim to “improve the competitiveness of tourist destinations,” point in this direction.⁷⁵ By coordinating investment and marketing projects within the framework of the Strategy and by developing joint initiatives, the GCC states can “leverage collective strengths and package a more compelling value proposition to tourists,”⁷⁶ thereby reinforcing economic complementarity within the region. At the same time, the intent to share benefits may help deepen regional cohesiveness by leveling development across member states, ultimately contributing to stronger integration within the GCC.

In addition, as part of concrete efforts aligned with the Tourism Strategy, the GCC states agreed in November 2022 to launch the Gulf Tourism Platform. This initiative is designed to serve as a “digital gateway that provides tourists with a one-stop shop for planning and booking their trips to the region,” while also offering practical tips and information on attractions and activities.⁷⁷ Hence, the platform holds potential as a valuable instrument for promoting diverse destinations across the GCC. However, to fulfill its intended purposes, it must be

regularly updated and enriched with relevant, comprehensive information on tourist sites, activities, and events, which currently remains an effort to undertake.⁷⁸

Another joint initiative, the Gulf Tourism Capital, introduced in November 2020, also aims “to highlight, promote, and attract investment in new projects and emerging tourism sites.”⁷⁹ Beyond the recurring intention to advance less explored tourism destinations, the initiative may also be viewed through a lens of broader implications. For instance, drawing a parallel with examples of EU programs that advance cooperation and shared identity, such as the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) program, these types of initiatives have also helped diffuse interstate tensions, especially those rooted in territorial disputes, by making borders less politically charged. In this light, the designation of Al-Ain as the Gulf Tourism Capital for 2025 can be seen as symbolically significant. Given Al-Ain’s and the surrounding area’s previous historical involvement in a prolonged territorial dispute among GCC states, its selection and inclusion in a region-wide tourism initiative may

⁷⁵ Translated into English from وزارة التراث والسياحة (Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman), “الاستراتيجية الخليجية للسياحة تعزز التكامل السياحي الخليجي المشترك” [The GCC Tourism Strategy Strengthens Joint Gulf Tourism Integration].

⁷⁶ Oxford Business Group, “GCC Promotes the Region as a Leading Tourism Destination.”

⁷⁷ Oxford Business Group, “GCC Promotes the Region as a Leading Tourism Destination.”

⁷⁸ Statistical Center for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC-Stat), “Platform for Tourism, Culture and Antiquities Statistics in the Gulf Cooperation Council,” accessed June 4, 2025, <https://tourism.gccstat.org/en/>.

⁷⁹ Oxford Business Group, “GCC Promotes the Region as a Leading Tourism Destination.”



further contribute to downplaying past tensions and fostering regional understanding.

Overall, the initiatives outlined above reflect a growing awareness from the GCC states that joint efforts to promote regional cohesiveness and economic complementarity can offer both economic and diplomatic benefits, enhancing the region's international visibility and presence. At the same time, the intention to promote emerging destinations, thereby distributing tourism and its associated economic benefits more equitably across member states, can be viewed through the prism of the EU's experience of strengthening collective power through balanced regional development. In particular, the EU's Cohesion Policy, a deliberate strategy of "investment in infrastructure, job creation, education, and training, particularly in less developed regions" with the aim of "reducing regional disparities and promoting economic and social cohesion among member states," may serve as a relevant reference point and inspiration for similar initiatives within the GCC.⁸⁰

In the same vein, internal facilitation of visa regulations is another

initiative being pursued under the framework of the Gulf Tourism Strategy. The experience of effective cross-border collaboration during the Qatar World Cup 2022 provided further impetus for advancing the "Schengen-style" visa for the GCC.⁸¹ The GCC Unified Visa, or GCC Grand Tourist Visa, initially targets tourists and businesspeople from 35 countries and will allow them to travel across all six GCC states with a single-entry document.⁸² Approved at the regional level in 2023, the project was planned to launch in 2025, although an exact implementation date has yet to be confirmed.⁸³

As illustrated, the strategic framework currently taking shape within the GCC in sectors falling within the soft power realm is increasingly supported by concrete initiatives. Although the practical implementation of these initiatives may encounter limitations and need more progress, some tangible outcomes of these joint efforts can be seen, for example, in Bahrain, which, as its Minister of Tourism states, "targeted 8.3 million tourists for 2022 but achieved 9.9 million visitors because [the country's authorities] co-promoted Bahrain along with the UAE and other GCC markets."⁸⁴ Nevertheless,

⁸⁰ Christian Koch, "Promoting Solidarity: GCC Reform and Potential Ideas from the EU," in *Gulf Cooperation Council Achievements and Challenges: Navigating Regional and International Relations*, ed. Ashraf Mohamed Keshk and Mona Saad AlResais (UK: Ethics International Press Ltd, 2025), 152.

⁸¹ Ayushi Anand, "'Schengen Style' Visa Approved for UAE and Other GCC Countries to Increase Tourism,"

Travel + Leisure. Southeast Asia, May 7, 2023, <https://www.travelandleisureasia.com/global/news/schengen-style-visa-for-uae-and-other-gcc-countries/>.

⁸² Gulf Research Center, *GCC Tourism Outlook*, 14.

⁸³ GCC Visa, "GCC Grand Tours Visa," accessed May 20, 2025, <https://gccvisa.com/#faq>.

⁸⁴ Ayushi Anand, "'Schengen Style' Visa Approved for UAE and Other GCC Countries to Increase Tourism."



considerable room remains for further progress, and the development of a structural soft power framework within the GCC can face both valuable opportunities and significant challenges.

Opportunities and challenges to a GCC regional soft power framework

The increasing number of joint initiatives in the cultural and tourism sectors illustrates a growing recognition, both among individual member states and the GCC as a regional bloc, of the strategic value of soft power cooperation. To strengthen this cooperative framework, a range of emerging opportunities can be seized to guide it toward a more structured and strategic regional soft power approach.

Opportunities

To start with, as the effectiveness of the soft power relies on the global reach of one of its components, namely norms and values, and the scope of their international appeal,⁸⁵ the ongoing efforts in economic diversification, the energy transition, innovation, and modernization all offer the GCC opportunities to redefine identity narratives, both nationally and regionally, and to include aspects that are of global relevance nowadays. These

evolving dimensions can serve as new complementing pillars of the GCC identity, added to the existing and foundational ones, based on shared cultural, religious, and political traits and embedded in the GCC's foundational charter. On the one hand, such a "hybrid identity," shaped by a blend of traditional values, national pride for success, and aspirations for global engagement,⁸⁶ presents an opportunity to "globalize" regional culture and reinforce a distinctive regional model or a regional brand. On the other hand, the issue of maintaining equilibrium between these two dimensions of identity without diminishing either of them in the complex regional social matrix, along with the sensitivity of the issue, may pose a challenge to the GCC states. Additionally, the current efforts of positioning the GCC as a global connectivity hub, whether in logistics, travel, or digital innovation, further add to the potential of presenting a new collective "brand" on the world stage. Both of these aspects, new identity dimensions and connectivity hub, may serve to recalibrate the long-standing external perception of the region as "major energy producers," defined primarily by hydrocarbon wealth.

To continue, cultivating the new regional identity requires joint cooperation in the cultural field. As

⁸⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 87.

⁸⁶ Zaid Ali Al-Fadhil, "The Evolution of Identity and Its Political Implications for the Arabian Peninsula: A

Strategic and Conceptual Analysis," *Journal of Strategic and Defense Studies*, April 2025, https://journalsds.com/article_451.html?lang=en



mentioned previously, the GCC Cultural Strategy 2020–2030 encourages closer collaboration on joint cultural projects, offering a valuable opportunity to redirect focus from individual national efforts toward more coordinated regional cultural initiatives. For instance, the establishment of an annual Gulf festival for culture, arts, and literature, hosted on a rotating basis by GCC member states, as suggested by Kuwaiti author and novelist Saud Alsanousi,⁸⁷ could serve as a platform to further familiarize the populations of the GCC states with their shared regional culture, and to promote mutual understanding and a sense of common regional belonging. Moreover, given the Strategy's emphasis on engagement with international cultural institutions, GCC states might consider closer cooperation in pursuing joint bids for inscription on UNESCO World Heritage Lists. This may be especially relevant with regard to the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, where multi-state nominations appear on a regular basis and where some elements have already been inscribed under a group of states including all of the GCC members, such as the 2022 listing of "Date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions and practices" and the 2024 inscription of "Henna: rituals, aesthetic and social practices."⁸⁸ Such initiatives would align with the Vision strategies' goals of

safeguarding and promoting national heritage, both domestically and globally. The GCC regional institutional framework may stand as a platform that could facilitate the preparation of joint nominations, either among GCC countries or in partnership with external states. This approach would not only encourage cooperation on shared cultural heritage but also foster mutual understanding of common norms and values, while projecting a unified and collaborative image abroad.

In parallel, the sports field may stand as another significant leverage point for common soft power cooperation within the GCC. The 2022 World Cup demonstrated the value of joint regional cooperation, but also, as Kristian C. Ulrichsen points out, fostered a sense of regional "*khaleeji*" unity and pride.⁸⁹ Ahead of the event, in May 2022, the Secretary Generals of all six GCC National Olympic Committees decided to get "sports in the Gulf region [...] bigger and better" by enlarging the GCC Games (a regional multi-sport event) to include the GCC Youth Games and GCC Indoor Martial Arts Games, along with inviting Jordan, Morocco, Iraq, and Yemen to the next 4th GCC Games to be held in Qatar in 2026, and emphasizing the possibility for women's participation in all the sports programmed at the

⁸⁷ QNA, "Historical Unity a Source of Inspiration for Bonding among People in GCC," *Gulf Times*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.gulf-times.com/article/672992/qatar/historical-unity-a-source-of-inspiration-for-bonding-among-people-in-gcc>.

⁸⁸ UNESCO, "Browse the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices," *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>

⁸⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup," 24.



Games' next edition.⁹⁰ Afterwards, during the March 2025 meeting of the GCC representatives of the National Olympic Committees, the GCC Secretary General highlighted joint Gulf cooperation and coordinated initiatives in the sports field as a way "to elevate our collective presence and highlight our unified Gulf identity."⁹¹ Ongoing efforts by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE to jointly bid for the hosting of the 2035 Rugby World Cup are in line with this logic of collective effort.⁹² This joint bid marks a significant step forward compared to the competitive bids by Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the 2030 Asian Games, which occurred in 2020 during the regional rift period. However, major sports events with the largest scale of international coverage have not yet seen joint bids issued by GCC states. Saudi Arabia's 2023 attempt to bid for hosting the 2030 World Cup together with Greece and Egypt, rather than countries from the GCC, is one example of the further potential for joint cooperation among GCC members. As

the GCC is transforming into an "epicenter" of major sports events,⁹³ with the upcoming 2029 Asian Winter Games (Saudi Arabia), the 2030 Asian Games (Qatar), and the 2034 Asian Games and FIFA World Cup (both to be hosted by Saudi Arabia), the GCC may seize this opportunity for "opening new horizons for sports integration in order to accomplish common goals and reflect the bright image of the Council countries."⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the bids for the 2036 Summer Olympics, which both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are reportedly considering to pursue, may stand as a test for Gulf regional sports cooperation in the context of a major global sporting event.⁹⁵

Another area where the GCC states can foster their common action is the field of humanitarian aid and development. As mentioned above, the GCC states have individually positioned themselves as major global providers of humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Gaza conflict and the

⁹⁰ Olympic Council of Asia, "Gulf Sports Get Huge Shot in the Arm with More Countries at Next GCC Games plus Inclusion of Two New Multi-Sports Events," *Olympic Council of Asia*, May 25, 2022, <https://oca.asia/news/3062-gulf-sports-get-huge-shot-in-the-arm-with-more-countries-at-next-gcc-games-plus-inclusion-of-two-new-multi-sports-events.html>.

⁹¹ GCC Secretary General, "HE GCCSG: Observers of the GCC's Sport Sectors Will Clearly Notice the Significant Rise and Development in the Levels and Numbers of Olympic Athletes from the Council States, & the Series of Honourable Achievements Regionally and Internationally," May 11, 2025, <https://gcc-sg.org/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/news2025-5-11-6.aspx>.

⁹² Joshi Sim, "Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia Prepare Joint Bid for 2035 Rugby World Cup," *SportsPro*, May 31,

2025, <https://www.sportspro.com/news/rugby-world-cup-2035-qatar-uae-saudi-arabia-hosting-bid-asia-march-2025/>.

⁹³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Qatar: Between the Blockade and the World Cup," 24.

⁹⁴ GCC Secretary General, "HE GCCSG: Observers of the GCC's Sport Sectors Will Clearly Notice the Significant Rise and Development in the Levels and Numbers of Olympic Athletes from the Council States, & the Series of Honourable Achievements Regionally and Internationally."

⁹⁵ Braden Keith, "Qatar Joins the Bidding for the 2036 Olympic Games After 2016 and 2020 Misses," *SwimSwam*, May 2, 2024, <https://swimswam.com/qatar-joins-the-bidding-for-the-2036-olympic-games-after-2016-and-2020-misses/>.



December 2024 developments in Syria also demonstrated the remaining potential for joint GCC humanitarian cooperation. In particular, the Joint Statement of the October 2023 extraordinary meeting of the GCC Ministerial Council announced immediate financial contributions of \$100 million for urgent humanitarian aid to Gaza.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the extraordinary meeting of the GCC Supreme Council held in December 2024 called for the lifting of sanctions on Syria, emphasizing the humanitarian intent to support the Syrian population.⁹⁷ This projection of the GCC as a humanitarian diplomacy actor may not only strengthen its international reputation but also serve as a means of achieving greater coordination in external action. Jointly elaborating humanitarian action and strategies may contribute to enhancing mutual understanding of shared interests and political orientations and promote a more coordinated external action approach among the six states. This stronger GCC joint action could also be extended to the broader field of development cooperation, where both humanitarian and development initiatives can take the form of

interregional partnerships with other international actors, allowing for further enhancement of presence and actorness. For instance, in its Strategic Partnership with the Gulf launched in 2022, the European Union points out the potential for a closer EU-GCC interregional cooperation within the humanitarian and sustainable development field in line with the “humanitarian-development-peace nexus.”⁹⁸ The Strategic Partnership explicitly calls for exploring “joint initiatives in third countries through triangular cooperation” through the framework of various European initiatives, such as the Global Gateway, REPowerEU, or the European Green Deal, in order to foster sustainable investments, especially in the broader Middle East and Africa.

In the field of joint external action, another way for the GCC to increase its international presence and its capability, both essential criteria for actorness, may be by drawing on ASEAN cooperation formats. The idea advanced by some GCC experts⁹⁹ of exploring the feasibility of establishing structured cooperation frameworks modeled on ASEAN’s cooperation formats with its dialogue partners may promote the

⁹⁶ Foreign Ministry of Oman, “Statement of Extraordinary GCC Ministerial Council on Gaza,” October 17, 2023, <https://www.fm.gov.om/statement-of-extraordinary-gcc-ministerial-council-on-gaza/>.

⁹⁷ Al Arabiya English, “Gulf Cooperation Council Calls for Lifting Sanctions on Syria,” *Al Arabiya English*, December 26, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2024/12/26/gulf-cooperation-council-calls-for-lifting-sanctions-on-syria>.

⁹⁸ European Union External Action, “Joint Communication on a ‘Strategic Partnership with the Gulf,’” May 18, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-strategic-partnership-gulf_en.

⁹⁹ Abdullah Baabood, *The Gulf Cooperation Council at 40*, Arab Gulf States Institute, YouTube video, 1:02:30–1:03:05, posted by AGSIW, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=203Mdq8ldoA>.



region's stance as a unified body on the international stage and highlight its cooperative and engaged image. Over the past two decades, the GCC's interregional dialogue initiatives have grown significantly, with ministerial and summit-level dialogues now including the US, the EU, Russia, China, the UK, France, and ASEAN among others. The summit formats have recently been expanded, and meetings with the highest-level representatives between GCC-China (December 2022), GCC-ASEAN (October 2023), GCC-EU (October 2024), and GCC-Central Asia (April 2025) have been held for the first time. This increasingly active external political dialogue dynamic may present a foundation for a more structured and recurrent cooperation approach.

Moreover, the promotion of the GCC as an internationally engaged and politically relevant actor may further be advanced through ingraining the GCC as a global peace-committed player by establishing it as a relevant mediation platform. The 2011 GCC-brokered initiative in Yemen may be seen as an attempt by the GCC as a regional bloc to perform this role. Moreover, all six GCC states have been active in various mediation efforts on both regional and international levels, with Oman and Kuwait having portrayed their mediating efforts as distinctive features of their foreign policy, Qatar having long crafted its image as a key mediation channel, especially in negotiations involving major actors, and Saudi Arabia and the

UAE actively entering the field, scaling up mediation and peace-oriented efforts in regional and international issues, with Riyadh's rapprochement with Teheran highlighting Saudi orientation towards regional de-escalation. In this vein, the diplomatic capital of important mediation players, accrued by individual GCC states on different regional and international occasions, can help foster collective credibility and elevate the GCC as a regional institutional platform for mediation. However, for this to materialize, the GCC as a regional organization must build external confidence in its unified stance, which also requires avoiding internal rifts. The renewed cooperation momentum after the reconciliation and the 2022 World Cup may help shift perceptions. Yet, as was mentioned earlier, tensions and competitive dynamics persist within the region, which remain among the challenges the GCC may face on the path toward enhancing its collective international soft power appeal.

Challenges

Competition among the GCC states, as demonstrated above, extends into the soft power realm and reflects broader strategic considerations of regional leadership and international relevance. This competition not only affects the ability of the GCC states to work together on the elaboration of a common structural soft power policy, but also undermines the image of a unified regional actor. Besides, internal political



tensions resulting in stalled or suspended regional integration projects damage the credibility of the GCC as a unified body and further obstruct efforts to build a cohesive regional soft power platform. The suspension of the Monetary Union project since 2010, where one of the main frictions revolved around the “symbolic” issue of the location of the projected union’s Central Bank, with Riyadh and, pointing to its more liberalized economy, Abu Dhabi, as the main contenders, hints at the intertwined nature between political competition, the strategic use of immaterial aspects of power projection, and the progress of regional cooperation.

The entry of Saudi Arabia into the diversification and social transformation efforts, delayed to that of other states, such as the UAE, and its intensified steps to catch up with others, provided a new impetus for those competitive dynamics. This new context encouraged, for example, Saudi Arabia to announce in February 2021 its Regional Headquarters initiative, stipulating that foreign companies wishing to do business with Saudi government entities must relocate their regional headquarters (RHQ) to the Kingdom (effective as of January 1, 2024).¹⁰⁰ The move aligns with Saudi aspirations to shape itself as the leading commercial, industrial, and investment center in the region.

However, it directly challenges the UAE’s positioning, especially that of Dubai, as the region’s premier business hub, home to a wide range of foreign companies. This step by Saudi Arabia, particularly in light of its economic weight in the region, underlines Nye’s idea that economic resources may be used “to produce soft as well as hard power behavior,” “to attract as well as coerce.”¹⁰¹ In this context, the idea of the GCC as a united bloc aiming to promote cooperation may be jeopardized by assertive measures taken by its members. Meanwhile, these displays of “hard power” by some GCC states extend beyond the intra-regional level, where examples may include Saudi Arabia’s abrupt severing of diplomatic ties with Canada in 2018 (restored in 2023), UAE’s and Qatar’s past military involvement in Libya, or Abu Dhabi’s and Riyadh’s engagement in Yemen. Such actions risk undermining the GCC’s reputation as a reliable, peaceful, and cooperation-oriented actor, in line with Nye’s idea that an actor’s foreign policy conduct stands as one of the components shaping its soft power.

On top of that, with regard to the third key feature of actorness, opportunity, or the external context allowing action, as per Bretherton and Vogler’s understanding mentioned earlier, the regional and international

¹⁰⁰ Al Arabiya English, “Saudi Arabia’s Regional Headquarters Requirement Goes into Effect,” *Al Arabiya English*, January 1, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi->

[arabia/2024/01/01/Saudi-Arabia-s-regional-headquarters-requirement-goes-into-effect.](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-)

¹⁰¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, 85.



environments produce additional challenges for the GCC's soft power projection. To elaborate, the current conflictual environment in the Middle East, due to regional crises, impedes some regional initiatives. For instance, the India-Middle East Corridor (IMEC) project, which could reinforce the idea of GCC as a hub and underline its peace-oriented intentions, is currently under suspension. Besides, the destabilized regional situation and the increased military presence of international actors in the region as a consequence reinforce the perception of the GCC's dependency on external security guarantees, which weakens its standing as a capable crisis-management bloc. Moreover, this security dependence, amid the current context of a shifting international environment, may partly result in a mixed or inconsistent image of the region, where the GCC states have to navigate the dual task of, on the one hand, demonstrating commitment to cooperation with the US and European states to secure defense guarantees, and on the other, asserting greater independence, or what experts describe as "strategic autonomy," through broader engagement with powers like China and Russia together with multilateral formats such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

At the same time, the lack of a clear definition and distinctive recognition may be perceived with regard to the overall regional narrative. For example, the ASEAN's functioning and core of its regional identity, the "ASEAN way," together with its underlying concepts and values of consensus-building, preference for multilateralism, peaceful dialogue, non-violence, and non-interference have become a distinctive feature of the ASEAN regional organization and a globally recognized and academically studied model of regionalism. In academic discourse, especially in the field of comparative regionalism, with Amitav Acharya among the main references, ASEAN became an "alternative" non-European regional construct.¹⁰² This recognition further influences the political narrative and nourishes a distinctive brand of the ASEAN regional model. The GCC still needs to establish its own coherent and visible brand in public, academic, and political discourse, conveying its commitment to regional integration efforts.

In conclusion, the features highlighted above, such as innovation and connectivity, in combination with traditional identity elements, may stand at the core of the GCC regional brand and constitute the foundation of its common soft power projection. For this

¹⁰² Fredrik Söderbaum, "Theories of Regionalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism*, ed. Mark Beeson and Richard Stubbs (London: Routledge,

2011), https://www.academia.edu/6106775/Theories_of_Regionalism.



to happen, a joint comprehensive approach to soft power policies is needed. However, even at the individual national level, among the six states, only the UAE has constructed a comprehensive, coherent soft power ecosystem, whereas others proceed through sector-specific regulations in different soft power fields. In addition, sovereignty concerns and the demonstrated strategic implications of culture and soft power limit the possibility of delegating competencies to the regional level for a joint comprehensive soft power policy. This is reflected in still-fragmented regional soft power actions, affecting the efforts to construct a unified regional identity and its external projection. The opportunities highlighted above, which could foster a stronger cooperative soft power framework, may help overcome the existing challenges and move toward a more structured and unified soft power political vision.

Conclusion

To sum up, aspirations for far-reaching economic and political objectives require effective communication with a global community of actors, from individuals to states and international organizations, in order to attract their participation and gain their recognition. The power of attraction, or soft power, therefore, becomes a strategic asset and an essential political resource.

The example of the GCC demonstrates how these states, driven by goals of economic diversification and stronger international influence, dedicate increasing attention to soft power strategies and public diplomacy as tools to shape and promote their evolving national brands. The incorporation of diverse soft power elements into their national Vision agendas underscores the important role soft power plays in achieving their transformation aspirations. This emphasis has also fostered intense competition among GCC states across various soft power domains.

Meanwhile, recent regional developments demonstrate a growing awareness within the GCC of the added value that cooperation can bring. Regional initiatives, such as the adoption of the first joint Cultural and Tourism Strategies, the creation of the Gulf Tourism Platform, the launch of the Gulf Tourism Capital initiative, the advancement of a unified visa system, and enlarging joint action in the sports field, signal a shift toward structured regional engagement at the intersection of culture, tourism, and sports. This cooperative momentum offers a foundation for building a more comprehensive regional soft power framework.



However, despite progress, substantial challenges remain. Most notably, the institutionalization of regional soft power governance touches on the sensitive issue of sovereignty and the transfer of competences in a strategic domain, which in turn reveals and amplifies other underlying tensions and challenges. Sustaining the current cooperative momentum will require political coordination and institutional commitment, particularly to reconcile national interests with regional integration objectives. The 2022 World Cup provided an important impetus for collective cooperation. In this vein, the region's growing profile as a global venue for sports and cultural events may help sustain and further expand this cooperative impulse and coordinated approach.

As the GCC advances its regional agency and seeks a greater international role, the need to project its ambitions through a coherent and resonant voice becomes more pressing. Since building soft power and increasing regional actorness are mutually reinforcing processes, coordinated soft power efforts can contribute to deeper regional cohesion and more effective global engagement. In this context, a structural soft power framework elaborated on the GCC level may serve as a foundation to support the bloc's shared long-term ambitions and enhance its collective presence and influence on the world stage.

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